

TRANSFORMING SUFFERING INTO ART

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Like Kyoto, Granada is surrounded by mountains and has been one of the most important cities in the Iberian Peninsula for over a millennium. Even before the Umayyad conquest of Hispania, the Romans and Visigoths had occupied the entire province and tourists today can visit the palaces and scattered ruins around this ancient city. Yet, on the night before my departure from Spain three months ago when I made my final visit to Mirador San Nicolas, there was not a soul in this most famous plaza that offers the best view of the Alhambra palace. After the Spanish government officially declared lockdown, it was nearly impossible for anyone to go outside since the police patrolled the narrow streets of the Albaicin which preserves the Moorish architecture of the Nasrid dynasty. This was almost unbelievable since Granada is known for its outdoor drinking culture and passionate Flamenco dancing. Social distancing was a completely foreign concept, for a culture that prides itself in intimate human relationships and ethnic diversity. The friendly Moroccan shopkeepers, who I spoke to every day, and the guitarists and dancers, who made me reflect on the meaning of art, had all vanished.



The roof of a walled garden house in Albaicin

I was studying about the origins of Flamenco at the University of Granada but much of the information about this artistically sophisticated musical expression comes from the oral history of the gypsies who survived centuries of persecution. Fortunately, many of the most famous Roma families such as the Maya in Granada own Flamenco *tablaos* in Sacramonte. By frequenting live performances, I was able to develop a personal relationship with these amazing artists. What impressed me most was their close family ties and their pride in their traditions. Since it took the Romani people centuries to migrate through the Middle East, Eastern Europe and in some cases through North Africa before reaching Southern Spain, they absorbed numerous musical

traditions that enriched the origins of Flamenco. Thus, discussions about authenticity in Flamenco are not relevant for historians whose research involves a more macroscopic viewpoint.

Admittedly, there is a darker side of this narrative that most tourists fail to recognize. Flamenco is an expression of deep pain and persecution that the Romani people endured for centuries. Understanding how any minority group can withstand persecution for centuries is an almost impossible task. Intellectually one might be able to investigate the factors that contributed to strategies of survival, but people are emotional animals. Withstanding humiliation in itself requires mental resilience.

After the exclusion of Jewish people in 1492, the gypsies retreated to the mountains where they consolidated their most essential tribal values and developed unique dance steps. Although both the state and the Catholic Church persecuted gypsies, the *gitano* remain in Granada to this day. The reasons why the Spanish maintained their prejudice against gypsies for centuries is a paper in itself, but most people with no legal authority mistakenly regarded the Roma as a mixed group of vagabonds.

Examples of systemic persecution are so numerous that students can become callous if they neglect to study the cruel details of history. The Roman persecution of Christians, anti-Jewish pogrom of the Russian empire and the extermination of native American peoples were so terrible that even if one spends a life time researching the subject, it will be impossible to comprehend the pain and suffering of the persecuted peoples.

Most of us today would probably not be able to cope with persecution in any form if it is systematically un-



Side View of San Juan de los Reyes

dertaken by a cruel majority. The reason why so many demonstrations have broken out recently throughout the world is because racism and inequality have persisted to this day despite the advancement in science and technology. Since the civil rights movement in the United States, the prejudice that had been concealed under the mask of “political correctness” had been repressed for half a century. Unfortunately, ethnic and racial prejudices have been passed down like shameful secrets from generation to generation and the social media has allowed various supremacist groups to voice hatred.

Both the Romani and Afro-American people have proud musical traditions that are so expressive and attractive that people who do not share their cultural heritage often want to associate themselves with Flamenco and Jazz by imitating their fashion and melodic techniques. Langston Hughes who was an Afro-American journalist in Spain during the 1930s who recorded his impression of Flamenco *cantaora* in a *tablaó* he frequented in Madrid. “This plain old woman could make the hair raise on your head, could do to your insides what the moan of an air-raided siren did, could rip your soul-case with her voice. I found her strange, high, wild crying of her flamenco in some ways was much like the primitive Negro blues of the deep south.” It is not a coincidence that Afro-Americans found striking paral-

lels between flamenco, jazz and blues. As persecuted minorities, *gitanos* had limited opportunities for self-expression outside of street performances. However, foreigners who witnessed their impressive performances and unique life-style began writing about their diverse body of *canciones* that came to be identified as Flamenco. The irony of this process is that eventually the Franco regime itself recognized the benefits of incorporating Flamenco as quintessentially Spanish music.

Most music of the ancient and feudal world is lost to history since the most famous songs are never written

down. Flamenco is exceptional in that it preserves some of the musical overtones of Romani, Arabic, Jewish and Christian music, not to mention popular street melodies and liturgical influences. As one of the great achievements of humanity, Flamenco offers drama and emotional relief that transcends cultural boundaries. Even if you do not have the opportunity to travel to Granada, I highly recommend students and teachers alike to frequent *tablaos* or Spanish restaurants and see how the suffering of the *gitanos* has been transformed into the passionate art of Flamenco.

